

Notes

Winter Records of Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher

The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is an uncommon summer resident in southern Ontario, ranging from Prince Edward County north to Simcoe and Bruce Counties, and southward. Dates in the province range from April 10 to November 12 (James *et al.* 1976).

On 2 December 1984, I found an active Blue-gray Gnatcatcher near Cambridge in the Regional Municipality of Waterloo. While walking along the Grand River, just southeast of Blair and across the river from Cambridge, I recognized the thin, nasal call of the gnatcatcher amongst those of Golden-crowned Kinglets (*Regulus satrapa*) and Black-capped Chickadees (*Parus atricapillus*). After "pishing" a few times, the bird approached to within 3 metres of me, so that I clearly recognized it as a female. For about one minute, it foraged in a nearby eastern white cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*), twice chasing chickadees out of its feeding area.

The temperature rose to 10° C on this day. Previous weeks had been milder than average for late fall.

On 16 December the bird was rediscovered by P. Weller and myself, during the Cambridge

Christmas Bird Count, about 40 m from the original site. We spent a few minutes watching it feeding from a small cloud of tiny flies around a shrub overhanging 2 metre high cliffs above the Grand River.

A record high temperature of 15° C activated invertebrates and vertebrates normally dormant in mid-December. This warm trend continued but weakened until cold weather arrived around Christmas. Two return trips in early January failed to locate this bird, which may have perished during a severe January 1st ice storm.

This may be only the second winter record of Blue-gray Gnatcatcher for Ontario. D. Rupert and J. Wilson found one individual during the 24 December 1982 CBC at Point Pelee (Wilson 1983).

CBC results from 1983 revealed that the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher is very rare north of Florida and the Gulf coast. Only 13 individuals were recorded in states north of Florida along the eastern seaboard (Virginia, North and South Carolina), while Florida counts turned up 3,420 individuals, more than any other state. Count results showed that Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were numerous

along parts of the Gulf coast (664 in Louisiana and 1262 in Freeport, Texas), with very few birds recorded on inland counts. They were also present on Arizona counts (197), and in California.

The Cambridge bird undoubtedly survived so long due to the unseasonably mild weather and a relatively abundant food supply. A physical or chemical disorder, or impairment may have prevented the bird's normal migratory

behaviour, rendering it captive to the Ontario winter.

Literature Cited

James, R.D., P.L. McLaren and J.C. Barlow. 1976. Annotated checklist of the birds of Ontario. Roy. Ont. Mus. Misc. Publ. 75 pp.

Wilson, J. 1983. The eighty-third Audubon Christmas bird count. 98. Point Pelee, Ont. Amer. Birds 37:428.

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Interaction of Two Snowy Owls in Burlington, Ontario

A winter sighting of a Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*) is exciting in itself. On 6 January 1985, Rob Cheskey was fortunate to watch two Snowy Owls interact.

Following is a description of what was seen.

At 1615h, Rob Cheskey was viewing waterfowl on Lake Ontario, on the south side of Lakeshore Blvd., just west of Brant St. in Burlington, Halton R.M. He noticed a large, whitish bird with a large round head and broad wings, which he identified as a Snowy Owl. It was flying eastward, about 10 m above the ground and 30 m distant. It continued east, landing on scaffolding above a building about 30 m high. After resting there for about one minute, the owl left its perch, and flew west. About 25 m away it slowed its flight and made high, thin screeching notes as a second Snowy Owl appeared

from the west, flying towards it. The two birds flew slowly towards one another and then encountered each other while airborne. An object which was formerly held by the second bird, was grasped by both birds as they twirled in mid-air. More screeching notes were heard while they were together. After a few seconds, the birds disengaged, and flew eastwards together flying out of view behind the large building on the south side of Lakeshore Blvd., opposite Brant St. No significant plumage differences were noted, perhaps because of dull light conditions. However, Rob Cheskey did see a distinct size difference while the two birds were together, suggesting that a male and female owl were involved in this display. Kay McKeever suggested (pers. comm.) that this was probably an aggressive encounter between two

birds vying for the same food supply. Bird's gonads would not

yet be active to stimulate courtship activity, she felt.

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Early Nesting Record for European Starling in Southern Ontario

On a bird-watching trip (10 March 1985) to Long Point, Haldimand-Norfolk R.M., we discovered a nest in a cavity about six meters from the group in a black willow (*Salix nigra*). The nestlings were calling quite loudly. On climbing the tree, we found the entrance to the cavity was too narrow to allow a hand to pass. A single European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) was observed flying in the vicinity of the nest. The flashlights we had with us were not powerful; thus, we were unable to see the nestlings. On observing the nest for five to ten minutes, two adult starlings were seen at the mouth of the cavity.

Judging by the strength of the nestlings' calls, we estimated their age to be at least a few days. The incubation period for *S. vulgaris* is between 12 and 15 days (Harrison 1984). This would mean that a conservative estimate of the laying of the last egg would be 24 February 1985. The previous

earliest nesting record for this species in Ontario is believed to be 26 March (R. James, pers. comm.). This nest, containing five eggs, was found in Gloucester Twp., Ottawa-Carleton R.M. by W.A. Holland of Ottawa. We know of only one other March nesting record for *S. vulgaris*, this being a nest, containing three eggs, discovered by E.A.C. Miller of Toronto in Mulmur Twp., Dufferin Co. (R. James, pers. comm.).

Acknowledgement:

We thank Dr. Ross James, Associate Curator of Ornithology at the Royal Ontario Museum, for informing us of previous early starling nest records.

Literature Cited

Harrison, C. 1984. A field guide to the nests, eggs and nestlings of North American birds. Collins Publishers, Don Mills, Ontario.

S.C. Loughheed and D.W. Graham, Dept. of Zoology, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1

Food Gathering for Nestlings by a Male Black-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*)

North American woodpeckers can be grouped into two categories with regard to their food gathering strategies for nestlings. One group, including the Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*), Hairy Woodpecker (*P. villosus*), and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*), carries food to the nest in the bill and generally feeds one nestling per trip (Lawrence 1966; Stokes and Stokes 1983). The second group, including the Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*), Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*), Black-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*), and Three-toed Woodpecker (*P. tridactylus*), are known to, or are suspected of, ingesting food and regurgitating it to the nestlings (Bent 1939; Stokes 1979).

Precise observations on the food gathering behaviour of the Black-backed Woodpecker during the nesting period seem to be limited. On 30 June 1984, while gathering data for the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas project near McKaskill Lake in southeastern Algonquin Provincial Park, Nipissing Dist., I noticed a male Black-backed Woodpecker foraging on a dead white spruce (*Picea glauca*). It flew off, presumably to a nest, and returned to the same tree a few minutes later, to resume its food gathering. It worked quickly, chipping off flakes of bark, probing tunnels of wood borers with its

tongue, and extracting the larvae. I had sufficiently good views of the process to determine that the larvae being extracted were of a large species of long-horned wood-boring beetle (perhaps a species of *Monochamus*, Cerambycidae, Coleoptera). On this single spruce, the woodpecker captured at least 12 large larvae. It apparently filled its crop with at least eight beetles, and then continued foraging until its beak was also filled with four visible larvae. Although Bent (1939) and Kilham (1983) note that Black-backed Woodpeckers regurgitate food to their young, based on the behaviour and duration of visits at the nest, this appears to be the first report of this species becoming fully engorged, in addition to carrying food in its beak, while foraging for its nestlings.

Literature Cited

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Topic of Note

Eds. Comment: We are very pleased with the response to date to the Topic of Note feature: an article-length contribution and several notes. Interest still seems to be high in our first Topic: feeding and damage by woodpeckers; and we hope there are more notes out there on interactions between birds and snakes. The Topic of Note for the December issue should come as no surprise: roosting locations of birds in Ontario. There is little information available on where most bird species roost. In fact, the roosting behaviour of some species is totally unknown. Also, in Ontario, there are many large roosts known for several species that are common knowledge among birders but are unrecorded in Ontario's bird literature, e.g. starlings under the Burlington Skyway and Gardiner Expressway

Bridges, crows at Chatham and Thunder Bay, numerous blackbird roosts and Blue Jays. Where do the large flocks of migrating Blue Jays spend the evening? If you have factual information on where, when and in what numbers any bird species roost in Ontario, write it up in note form and send it to us.

We will continue the Topic of Note feature into 1986. The Topic for the April issue will appeal to our botanically oriented members: natural foods of passerines in winter. Observe passerines feeding (not at feeders) in winter, 1 December - 28 February or while the ground is snow covered, identify exactly what they are feeding on and send us a short note on it. Notes will be due by 15 February 1986. In the next issue we will try to list several botanists who can assist in the identification of plant seeds, etc.

Corrections.

In Table 1 of Ken Dance's note entitled "Man-made Materials in Nests of Gray Catbird" (Vol. 3(1): 35), the contents of nest No. 6 should include 11 pieces of plastic, not one.

Adolf Vogg's name was inadvertently omitted from the list of those who correctly guessed the Gray Jay Mystery Map from Vol. 2 No. 3.